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# How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, And The Hidden Power Of Character

how children  
succeed

PAUL TOUGH



## Synopsis

The story we usually tell about childhood and success is the one about intelligence: Success comes to those who score highest on tests, from preschool admissions to SATs. But in *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough argues for a very different understanding of what makes a successful child. Drawing on groundbreaking research in neuroscience, economics, and psychology, Tough shows that the qualities that matter most have less to do with IQ and more to do with character: skills like grit, curiosity, conscientiousness, and optimism. *How Children Succeed* introduces us to a new generation of scientists and educators who are radically changing our understanding of how children develop character, how they learn to think, and how they overcome adversity. It tells the personal stories of young people struggling to stay on the right side of the line between success and failure. And it argues for a new way of thinking about how best to steer an individual child - or a whole generation of children - toward a successful future. This provocative and profoundly hopeful book will not only inspire and engage listeners; it will also change our understanding of childhood itself.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours and 4 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: September 4, 2012

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B0095PEWH8

Best Sellers Rank: #18 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Education #30 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Children's Studies #42 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > Educational Psychology

## Customer Reviews

Following the footsteps of Jonathan Kozol, Paul Tough employs his significant storytelling abilities to help readers see and feel the plight of children, families and communities trapped in cycles of failure and poverty. *How Children Succeed* challenges some conventional wisdom on causes of failure (poverty, teacher quality) and contends that nurturing character in children and young adults is the

key to success. As a former NYC Teaching Fellow who has lived and worked in multiple communities of cyclical poverty, I'm convinced that Tough has nailed some critical pieces of breaking those cycles. Here is the argument in brief:=====There exists in our society a troubling and growing achievement gap between the have and the have-nots. The cause of that gap is neither merely poverty nor IQ, but a specific set of non-cognitive skills including executive function and conscientiousness, which Tough calls "character." Children who acquire these skills can break historic cyclical patterns of failure. Malleability of Character and Intelligence=====Whereas IQ is hardly malleable, executive function and character strengths - specifically grit, self-control, zest, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, curiosity and conscientiousness - are far more malleable. These skills are better predictors of academic performance and educational achievement than IQ and therefore ought to be the direct target of interventions. Attachment and Lifelong Health=====Tough sees two key areas of influence for those who care for those trapped in cycles of poverty. The first is secure early attachment to parents.

Paul Tough sets out to answer a rather heady question in a rather slim 200 pages: what makes children succeed? To his credit, Tough packs in a dense barrage of different perspectives (economic, social, psychological, and medical) and he supports his points well with ample research. The resulting book is interesting reading and provides a great deal of food for thought. I appreciate Tough's contribution, but I have to quibble with some of his conclusions. Tough begins his book talking about the rise of cognitive interventions in early childhood. Ever since some studies showed some positive effects of various kinds of early childhood stimulation, parents have rushed to play Mozart for their developing fetuses, companies have marketed products guaranteed to get your baby reading, and competition for the "best" preschools has become a blood sport. But Tough argues that these interventions, while well intentioned, are ultimately misguided. While cognitive skills are certainly important, and early stimulation can boost these skills somewhat, there may be a different, over-arching set of skill which may be more important to overall success in life. These skills are the non-cognitive skills commonly grouped under the rubric of "character". As Tough dives into the meat of his exploration, he opens with a look at the negative effects of poverty, its correlations with trauma and adverse childhood events (abuse, witnessing violence, neglect, malnutrition, etc.), and how these factors affect an individual through his life - cognitively, emotionally and even physically. He explores attachment theory and the role of attachment in soothing and undoing the effects of early adverse events.

Why do some children succeed in life and others do not? Why does a bright child end up a failure as an adult while a more average student ends up a success? Paul Tough says that the answer is character. Traits like self-control, diligence, and perseverance are better predictors of success in life than IQ. In fact, those who are especially bright, may be set up for failure as they become used to everything in school coming easily to them, and are ill-prepared for the difficulties of the "real world." I found the book absolutely fascinating, both informative and enjoyable to read. The book is full of research and example to make the author's point. It does a wonderful job demonstrating that character does matter and is as essential for a child to learn as any academic subject. This is not, however, a how-to book that goes into great detail about how to instill these traits in your children/students. One of the groups that the author focuses on significantly is those of low socioeconomic status. He makes the case, convincingly, that the main problem that they have to overcome is the stressful circumstances of their childhood, such as violence, broken homes, etc. Most find themselves significantly impaired by the constant strain of their early environment. Yet those with close supportive relationships with their caregiver(s) and the opportunity to develop key character traits are able to rise above their circumstances. The author also focuses on a low-income school in NYC that produces champion chess teams. Children who manage to apply themselves and become national masters are obviously bright. And yet it doesn't translate into test scores, which show them to be woefully behind their peers.

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